DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 845 PS 018 895

AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
TITLE Questions about Montessori Education Today.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at a Symposium of the American Montessori Society (Arlington, VA, April 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; Criticism; Early Childhood Education; *Educational Development; *Educational Practices; Educational Principles; *Educational Theories; *Ideology; *Learning Processes; *Montessori Method; *Program Improvement; Student Experience; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Constructivism; Educational Criticism; *Theory Development

ABSTRACT

In three parts, this symposium presentation to the American Montessori Society: (1) comments generally on current perceptions of Montessori education; (2) poses questions about practices in Montessori classrooms that challenge Montessori educators' core beliefs about Montessori education; and (3) discusses the cutting edges of contemporary Montessori methods education. In addition to general comments, Part 1 provides a discussion of the function of ideology in early childhood education and ways of opening closed belief systems to rational examination. Questions posed in part 2 concern essential aspects of classroom practices, the Montessori position statement, and general questions about Montessori theory to promote open discussion. Part 3, noting that a few decades ago the incorporation of pretend play activities into the Montessori classroom was the "cutting edge" of Montessori practices, asks such questions as "How would Maria Montessori respond to contempory educators' emphasis on project work and current advances in knowledge about teaching strategies that facilitate language development?" In conclusion, suggestions are offered on the substantial assets of the Montessori method, with a view toward future developments. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Questions about Montessori Education Today

ED321845

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.
Professor of Early Childhood Education
Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign

August, 1990

PS 018895

A paper presented at the American Montessori Society Symposium on Montessori in the Contemporary American Culture, April, 1990. Arlington, Va.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lilian G. Katz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Questions About Montessori Education Today

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.

Although I am not a Montessori educator, I come to the topic of this symposium with a very soft spot for Maria Montessori, and for the American Montessori Society with its commitment to providing a sound education for our young children. Indeed, how could anyone in the field of early childhood education not have a soft spot for Maria Montessori? The entire early childhood profession owes so much to her. But of course, there is no need for me to tell this audience about the importance and significance of Montessori's ideas and practices. That is not my role in this symposium! My role and my goal in this presentation is to pose questions that will provoke you into explicating what you are about, and what you really mean when you use your "inside" language among yourselves so that the rest of us in early childhood education can gain a fuller understanding of Montessori education today.

Kinds of Questions

Because my assignment is to pose questions, I want to say a bit about three kinds of questions and the different functions they can serve. The first kind, commonly used by teachers at every level of

education, is a type of *interrogation* question in which the questioner looks for a predetermined right answer (e. g. What was the date of the Louisiana Purchase? What did I just say? What color is your shirt?). These are questions that have correct answers; guessing or approximating would not be acceptable responses. Such interrogations can be quite intimidating; they often make respondents feel somewhat powerless. Furthermore, because the questioner already knows the answer he or she is looking for, such questions also have a phony quality. I once observed a teacher of four-year-olds leading a debriefing discussion following a field trip to an aquarium. When she asked the group, "How did the fish get in the tank?" one of them responded "Have you forgotten already?" This youngster had not yet learned to play the question-answer games typical of the school culture. Perhaps there is a place for such questions in teaching, as for example when a teacher wants to check whether a child knows her address or phone number. In such cases phoniness can be avoided by the teacher saying straightforwardly something like "I want to know if you know your address and phone number. Please say it to me."

The second kind of question, mostly used in conversations, discussions and interviews, are those that *solicit* answers which are not anticipated, and the purpose of which is to solicit the respondent's ideas, views or opinions that the questioner does not know in advance (Is the blue shirt one you like?). A third kind of question- sometimes called *illuminating* questions - are those that require respondents to flesh out the ellipses in their written and spoken expressions, i. e. the ends of sentences left unsaid that are

understood by insiders and not by outsiders. For example, I recently met a school superintendent who proudly declared that his district is committed to the goal that "Every child will have success." When I asked him "Success at what?" I was provoking him to complete the sentence, and thereby to help me understand what the children were to be successful at. The superintendent was quite puzzled by my question; most of the people he interacts with apparently fill in the ellipses of the sentence without difficulty. But to an outsider like myself the end of the sentence was missing and I did not know what meaning to give it.

I propose to use all three kinds of questions; but I shall try to employ the illuminating kind as much as possible because I believe they aid the process of self-scrutiny, which I take to be one of the main purposes of this symposium. My presentation is divided into three general sections. The first offers some introductory comments about Montessori education, especially as perceived by outsiders. The second part is a list of my questions about Montessori education, and the third part is a discussion about the cutting edges of contemporary Montessori Methods education.

General Observations about Montessori Education Today

As part of my preparation for this symposium I did some catching up on the recent Montessori literature, and revisited some of Maria Montessori's own writing as well. In addition, I interviewed as many students, colleagues, and teachers as I could about their opinions,

perceptions and especially their own direct experiences of Montessori education. Two of my respondents were qualified Montessori teachers, but had left the fold for a variety of reasons. I interviewed about thirty people in this process, but unfortunately my sampling was not systematic.

On the whole my findings were somewhat puzzling. Many people whose own children had been in Montessori preschools were very pleased with their experience. Of about a dozen parents interviewed, only two of them were unsure that Montessori was "right" for their particular children.

Even more interesting to me were the kinds of comments made by graduate students, colleagues, and teachers in the wider early childhood education community. Listening to their responses to my probing gave me the impression that there is a fairly strong stereotype of Montessori practices, teachers and advocates in the general community of early childhood practitioners; there is even a trace of hostility attached to it. You may have some guesses about why this is so. I am not sure how to account for it. But it is useful to keep in mind that any method of teaching can be done well or poorly; no doubt you know of cases of Montessori education that embarrass you yourselves! It could be that my informal sample included a few whose exposure to Montessori education included some poor implementations. I doubt whether you will be surprised by any of the general views expressed by my interviewees. The main comments were as follows:

> Montessori methods place too little emphasis on children's social development;

Montessori educators underestimate the value of pretend play;

In Montessori classrooms children are not sufficiently spontaneous; they seem restrained and restricted;

Montessori philosophy talks a lot about liberty, but Montessori teachers seem to be very controlling;

Teachers in Montessori classrooms often seem unnatural; teachers' talk is stylized, pre-scripted and proscribed.

Montessori teachers seem rather distant and cold in their relations with children; they are not supposed to touch the children, for example.

In a Montessori classroom the children have to use the same self-correcting materials all year; the range of available materials is too narrow.

In the course of my informal investigation and discussions I often pointed out to my respondents that even though the available relevant research has many problems, it generally gives Montessori Methods good marks; I know of little in the way of negative findings about the effects of Montessori education. But my respondents remained unimpressed by the evidence!

Perhaps some of the distance between Montessori and other early childhood educators is due to insufficient contact between Montessori and the wider early childhood education community. Perhaps some people acquired their stereotypes of Montessori and her disciples from history of education courses, or from frustrating attempts to read Maria Montessori's own words without benefit of knowledgable modern interpreters.

My hunch is that the central issues that divide the general early childhood community from Montessorians are ideological rather than scientific, theoretical or even philosophical. Ideologies are sets of beliefs concerning the things about which we are the most passionate and of which we are least certain (Katz, 1977). We know that we have touched a person or group's ideological nerve when they take what we say about their views or positions personally rather than conceptually or philosophically. Furthermore, people who share an ideological commitment tend to use a special language, esoteric "in" words, or dialects not used or understood in the same way by outsiders. In addition, the insiders tend to remain separate, exclusive; they keep to themselves.

In principle, any field with a weak or unreliable data base suffers from a vacuum that is filled by ideologies which are typically promoted by attractive or charismatic leaders. Competing schools of thought tend to emerge about the most basic but elusive concerns of the field; sometimes factions, camps or cabals develop to preserve and advocate various versions of the truth. Ideologies tend to be related to an ideal conception of humanity and the good life. Although the term ideology usually carries with it derogatory connotations, ideologies serve important functions and are probably indispensable (Katz, 1977).

Early childhood education is a field that inevitably suffers from a weak data base for two reasons. First because the object of our concern - the young child - is by definition, immature. This means that the object of our inquiries and investigations is unstable and changing at such a rapid rate that generating valid and reliable

longitudinal empirical data is very problematic. The younger the subject, the more true it is that empirical studies must be reported with qualifiers about their validity and reliability. Second, the definitive experiments needed to settle the most troubling theoretical and pedagogical disputes would be unethical to conduct. As long as we have any sound reason to believe that something is "good" for children, it would be unethical to withhold it from them just for the sake of the advancement of science. In the same way, as long as we have any sound reason to believe that something might be harmful to children, it would be unethical to subject them to it as well. Thus we are always at the mercy of slippery data that are open to dispute and disagreement.

In any ideology-bound there is a strong tendency to resist and deny evidence (however slippery) that runs counter to our deep beliefs. Ideologies also generate strong temptations to become doctrinaire, to adhere slavishly to the words and pronouncements of the founding fathers and mothers, and become more rigid in interpreting the sacred texts that the founders themselves might have been.

One way of coping with the inherent temptations and difficulties of being in a field characterized by several competing ideologies and doctrines, is to take advantage of all possible opportunities to put our ideas out into the public arena to be analyzed, criticized, examined, cross-examined. One way of keeping ourselves 'clean' is to expose our beliefs and allow them to be pulled apart, challenged and evaluated in the light of other colleagues' experiences as well as our own. I propose to challenge your own

devoutly-held beliefs by presenting a set of questions. I hope that you will share your answers with each other, and with those of us who belong to the wider early childhood education community.

Questions about Montessori Education

The questions that follow are based on a limited experience and knowledge of the range of practices within Montessori schools. They also reflect my acceptance of the role as "devil's advocate" in this symposium.

The Essentials

* What is the essence in classroom practice without which a program cannot be identified or characterized as a genuine Montessori class? Are some elements of the method optional and some obligatory? Can all of you agree on what these are?

* What is excluded or prohibited in a Montessori class that might be allowed or even encouraged in another early childhood program? What might we see in a High/Scope, traditional or constructivist classroom that would not be consistent with Montessori principles?

* How eclectic can a teacher be and still be accredited and accepted as a Montessori practitioner?

* How much diversity can the Montessori approach tolerate and still honor the essential principles of the method?

* Is it still a Montessori classroom without multi-age grouping? Why so, or why not? How would single-age grouping be rationalized?

* Is it still a Montessori classroom without a garden? Without animals? How so? What principles are applied by which such decisions are made?

* If a classroom has the furniture, equipment and play materials designed and promoted by the Montessori movement, but no other elements of Montessori practice, can it still be called a Montessori class?

Your answers to the questions can illuminate for the rest of us the essence of sound Montessori practices and help us understanding their underlying principles.

The Position Statement

* Some of you say that the Montessori approach is not a curriculum model, but a mind-set, frame of reference, a set of values and attitudes. Are these reflected in the position statement? For example, the position paper states "The aim of Montessori education is to foster autonomous, competent, responsible, adaptive citizens who are life-long learners and problem solvers.." Does an educator have to be a "Montessori person" to subscribe to these aims? Are there early childhood educators who would deny them? If others share these aims, are they thereby Montessori persons? How so, or why not?

* The position paper states that "Respect for oneself, others, the environment, and life is necessary to develop a caring attitude towards all people and the planet." Are there early childhood educators who would disavow these aims? Is it a matter of values, or are there distinctive methods of achieving them? Does an educator have to be a Montessori person to subscribe to this view? Does this statement characterize the relationships Montessori people have with each other and with outsiders?

* The position paper states that the Montessori teacher is educated to use "Teaching strategies that support and facilitate the unique and total growth of each individual." What specific or uniquely Montessori strategies, for example, promote these aims? Does a teacher have to be Montessori-educated to acquire these strategies and value these goals?

* What does the term "cosmic values" mentioned in the position statement mean? Does the position statement use the term 'cosmic' in a special way? Does this refer to the traditional Montessori concern for education for peace, brotherhood and geographic literacy? Does one have to a Montessori educator to adopt these goals? I am not entirely convinced that these goals are developmentally appropriate at the preschool and kindergarten level. It seems to me developmentally appropriate for

preschoolers to be ethnocentric, and that the correct developmental sequence is to grow from seeing one's own home/culture, etc as superior to transcending one's own experience and characteristics and accepting those of others; thus as they develop, children should become adults who have outgrown their ethnocentrism and to become allocentric. Why assume that young children are better at peace and brotherhood than mature well-educated widely-travelled adults?

* The position statement also emphasizes autonomy and self-sufficiency. This seems consistent with Montessori's concern with inner or self-discipline. Why is that so important? It is understandable that Maria Montessori would work toward helping the children in Rome for whom she originally developed her methods to become more self-reliant. But I am not sure it is so important for modern American children who tend to become not so much prematurely independent as non-dependent. It seems to me that one of the big issues for contemporary child rearing and education is to learn how to achieve **inter**-dependence. What is the hurry to be autonomous? Parents of adolescents are not usually so thrilled to see their young become independent of them before they have acquired the wisdom and maturity that constructive use of freedom and independence requires.

General Questions

* Montessori educators have traditionally emphasized learning through the senses. What does that mean? In contrast to what other ways of learning? When a teacher uses a direct instructional method to teach phonics (e.g. Distar) , are not children learning through their senses? Are such practices acceptable to Montessori educators? If not, why not? If so, what is unique about the Montessori method?

Children may take in information through their senses, as do adults. But learning may involve making connections between internalized schemas, analyzing the meanings of stories, making sense of observations, and so forth. Let us take the example of a child absorbing information through his senses as he watches other children at play; he may very well be learning what he could and could not get away with in interactions with particular other children, or in the presence versus the absence of the teacher. Would you call this "learning through the senses"? When a four year-old experiments with ways to negotiate with peers, is that "learning through the senses?" What other ways might these social skills be learned?

One of the characteristic materials of Montessori education is the map puzzle. I am not sure of the rationale for including it. But it is clear to me that the true nature of the earth is not directly apprehensible to the senses of young children. To accept the fact that the world consists of continents, islands and oceans, etc. and is round is not at all *sensible* (at age 4 or 5 or even 6)! It must be taken on faith! To speak of this kind of learning as learning through the senses seems to me to seriously oversimplify it, and to underestimate the kind of intellectual work young children constantly engage in.

Furthermore, if children learn through their senses, all children do. But they do not all learn the same things. What are the things Montessori educators especially want all of them to learn? Answers to these questions could help explicate the basic assumptions you make about how children process information in their environment. I think it is useful to keep in mind that the term *learning* is morally neutral: one can learn to trust and/or mistrust, to cooperate and/or to compete, and to help and/or hurt; all of these things are learned! Are some learnings more important to Montessori educators than some others?

* Montessori literature frequently alludes to the "universals" of development. What are they? Do they include for example, the oedipal conflict? The anal stage?

How do these kinds of universals fit into Montessori conceptions of development?

* Montessori literature puts great emphasis on the "prepared environment." As long as an environment is prepared, is it acceptable? Many teachers prepare their classrooms carefully with learning centers, tables piled high with workbooks or worksheets, flash cards, and dittoed materials. Some are very carefully prepared indeed. Do such classes meet Montessori criteria? If not, why not? What principles are applied by which a "prepared environment" is classified as acceptable Montessori education?

* What does "constructivist" really mean? What principles of practice can be derived from asserting that children construct their understandings of the world? Presumably all children construct their understandings, regardless whether adults get involved in the constructions or not. Is there any other way for children to make sense of their experience other than to construct the best sense they can out of it? Are some constructions of children better than some others? Presumably the environment is specially prepared for the children so as to increase the likelihood that some constructions will be developed or at least be facilitated more than others. Which ones are most highly desired by Montessori educators, and why so? Does one

have to be a Montessori educator to promote those constructions? By way of example, Piagetians have been discussing children's acquisition of one-to-one correspondence for decades; presumably all children eventually, sooner or later, acquire the relevant schema. So why should an educator bother to prepare the environment to ensure that children learn it? Why not get on with other more useful and interesting investigations, explorations and learnings?

* What does it feel like to be a child in a Montessori class? When adult observers describe a class they provide a view from 'above' of what transpired within it, what it contains, and so forth. However, to make reliable predictions of the impact of early experiences, we need to make good inferences about the view from 'below,' i.e. what it feels like to each individual children to be a given particular physical and social environment. In other words, we need to make good estimates of the **quality of life experienced** by the children to properly evaluate a teaching/curriculum method. We want to know whether the view from 'below' is that the environment is interesting versus boring, engaging versus frivolous,. challenging versus amusing, satisfying versus entertaining, and so forth.

Early childhood educators frequently justify their practices on the grounds that "the children love it" - whatever "it" is; or they declare that the children are fascinated or excited by a particular activity. But feelings of amusement, fascination or excitement are not criteria of appropriateness for activities, materials or experiences offered in classes for young children. Children love many things that are not good for them (TV shows, toy weapons, etc.) Enjoyment is not an appropriate goal for education; it is the goal of entertainment. The goal of education is to engage the mind so as to help the learner make better, deeper,fuller and more accurate sense of his/her experiences and environment and to strengthen the disposition to go on learning worthwhile things.

Madame Montessori Today

* What would Mme Montessori say about today's children? How might she address their exposure to television cartoon violence, and the high-tech toys now available. Would Montessori have allowed children to play Batman in the classroom?

Perhaps she was on the right track with lessons on silence! They may be just as appropriate for modern American big-city children as they were for Montessori's young Romans.

* What would Montessori say about the expanding adoption of the High/Scope curriculum, of the achievement gains reported by the developers of the DISTAR approach to teaching reading?

* I have learned during this symposium that a few decades ago the incorporation of pretend play activities into the Montessori classroom was a "cutting edge" phenomenon. What is it today? Where are the cutting edges of Montessori practices? What fresh precepts, concepts are being investigated and experimented with, and proposed for the near future?

* What would Montessori be working on if she were among us today? Certainly she would be interested in the constant struggle to intervene in the early years of the children of poor families. But what teaching strategies might she be proposing in the light of all that has been learned about children since she first began?

  Would she have something fresh to say about teaching strategies that would facilitate language development in the light of all that has been learned about it in the last quarter century?

* What would Montessori say about including project work as I have described elsewhere (Katz and Chard; 1989) in

the daily classroom life of young children? In project work, usually working in small groups, children undertake an extended study of a topic related to their own environments and worth knowing more about. Invariably projects involve children in excursions outside their own classroom, collecting objects to handle and inspect closely. Children are encouraged to follow their interests as they emerge in the course of the work, and working in small groups is strongly advocated. The full scope of the work undertaken cannot be fully predicted from the outset.

* Why should Montessori education change at all? The results of the available research are generally positive. Montessori education seems to be thriving, expanding into public school systems, and attracting a good deal of attention. I suppose a big question for which we shall have to await the answer is Can others adopt bits of Montessori practices and still get positive results?

* Do Montessori methods fit into the developmentally appropriate practices guidelines developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987)? What are some ways they vary from the guidelines?

I believe your responses to these questions could do so much to strengthen the contribution of Montessori educators to early

childhood education in general, and also enhanced outsiders' understandings of your position on the complex issues that confront all of us.

The future of Montessori education

As I indicated at the outset, I myself am not a Montessori practitioner. But there are many Montessori ideas and practices that to me seem to continue to be highly appropriate in the light of experience and research on how young children grow, learn and develop. and that I want to encourage you to hold on to as steadfastly as you can.

To begin with, I want to urge you to hold on to your insistence on the importance of istrinsic motivation. In general the education of young children in our country is plagued by the excessive use of extrinsic rewards that I believe has negative consequences in the long term.

I hope also that you will maintain your commitment to unobtrusive, firm but gentle guidance of children. Keep your strong focus on the children as workers as well as players. I am more convinced than ever that Montessori was on the right track when she encouraged us to take children's thinking and work seriously, and to treat their efforts with respect. I am not as keen on the autodidactic materials as most of you are, but they surely cannot hurt. I just hope that you will add to the standard Montessori equipment more art work along the lines we have seen in Reggio Emilia in Italy (Katz, 1990) and much

more project work as Sylvia Chard and I have described it (Katz & Chard, 1989).

I have a strong hunch that one of the great assets of the Montessori method is that, when properly implemented, the adults give children very clear signals about what is valued, what is expected, acceptable and unacceptable. I believe that most young children benefit from having clear unambiguous signals from the adults around them. Furthermore, when adults are unclear about what really matters, children push against them with all their might in order to find out!

In so many classes for young children in preschools, child care centers and kindergartners, children and their efforts are frequently admired as "cute" and not taken as seriously as they should be. I think Maria Montessori understood intuitively very early the importance of treating children's thoughts and feelings. I hope you safeguard that quality of the approach.

I hope also that you maintain your commitment to eschewing fantasy and fanciful products and decor. I believe the majority of our young children suffer from a surfeit of adult-generated fantasy. It is one thing to encourage, appreciate and support children's own rich fantasies and imaginations, but quite another to impose those of adults and various industries (Disney World, Barbie Dolls) upon them from above. We have reached a stage that I call the abuses of enchantment; it is another aspect of treating children like silly empty-headed pets that have to be amused and titillated.

I want to encourage you to keep your commitment to being direct and authentic with children. Some colleagues and students I spoke to about Montessori before the symposium complained that Montessori teachers don't speak naturally to children. I have not observed this myself in a Montessori class, though I have in others. I just want to emphasize that it is important to speak to children as people with lively minds, to appeal to their good sense, and ensure that your interactions with them are authentic rather than phony and stylized.

Summary

I hope that you will be able to take time to address the questions presented, and develop a model of teaching that includes some of the aspects of others' contemporary practices that I have just listed. I hope you will incorporate project work into the curriculum, and that you will emphasize the **intellectual** rather than the **academic** life of the child. I hope you take into account as you develop your model the rich and recent data base that has been accumulating for the last twenty years about development of children's social competence. Keep in mind that social interaction cannot occur in a vacuum; children must be interacting *about* something - something of interest to them and that is rich in meaning for them. And I hope you call your fresh approach Modern American Montessori education.

Finally, remember that Montessori people are just like other people. Some do better than others in all kinds of

teaching. We in early childhood education have much more in common than we have apart. I hope we will meet again and share what we are all doing at the cutting edges of our work with young children, and that modern Montessorians will join with others in the field to address the basic needs of all of the world's children.

References

Bredekamp, S. (1987) Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8. Washington, D. C. : National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Katz, L. G. (in press) Lessons from Reggio Emilia . Young Children

Katz, L. G. (1977) Early childhood programs and ideological disputes. In L. G. Katz (Ed.), Talks with teachers (pp. 69 - 78). Washington, D. C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Katz, L. G. & Chard, S. C. (1989) Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach. Norwood, N. J. Ablex Publishing Corp.